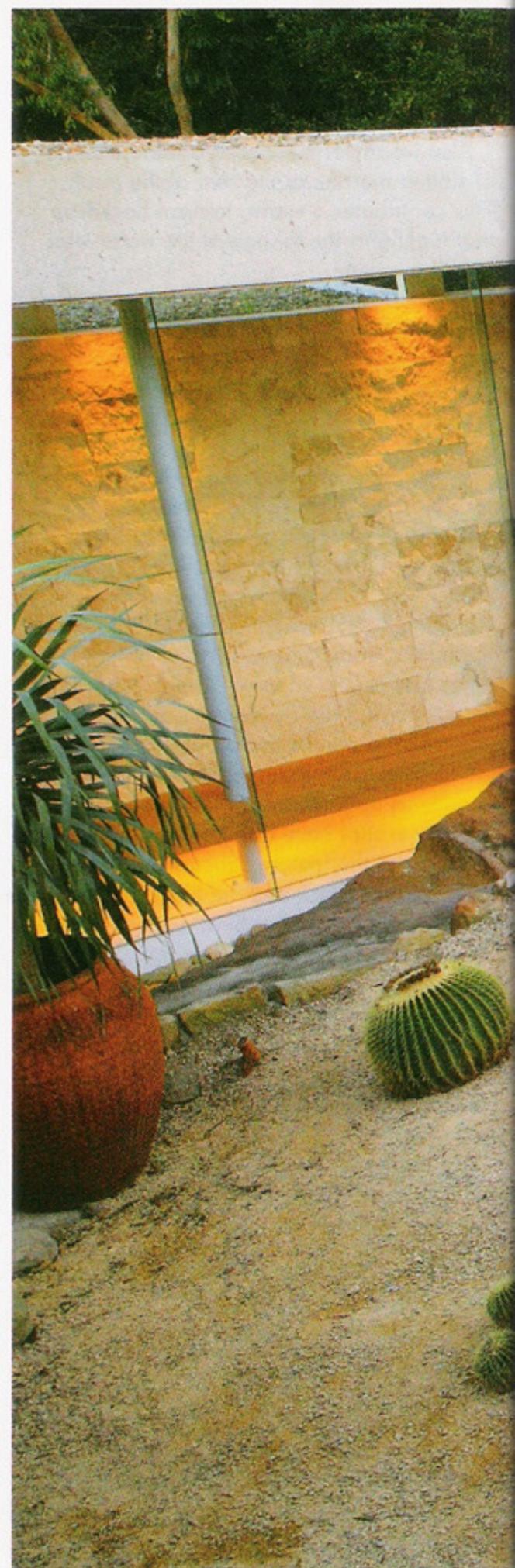
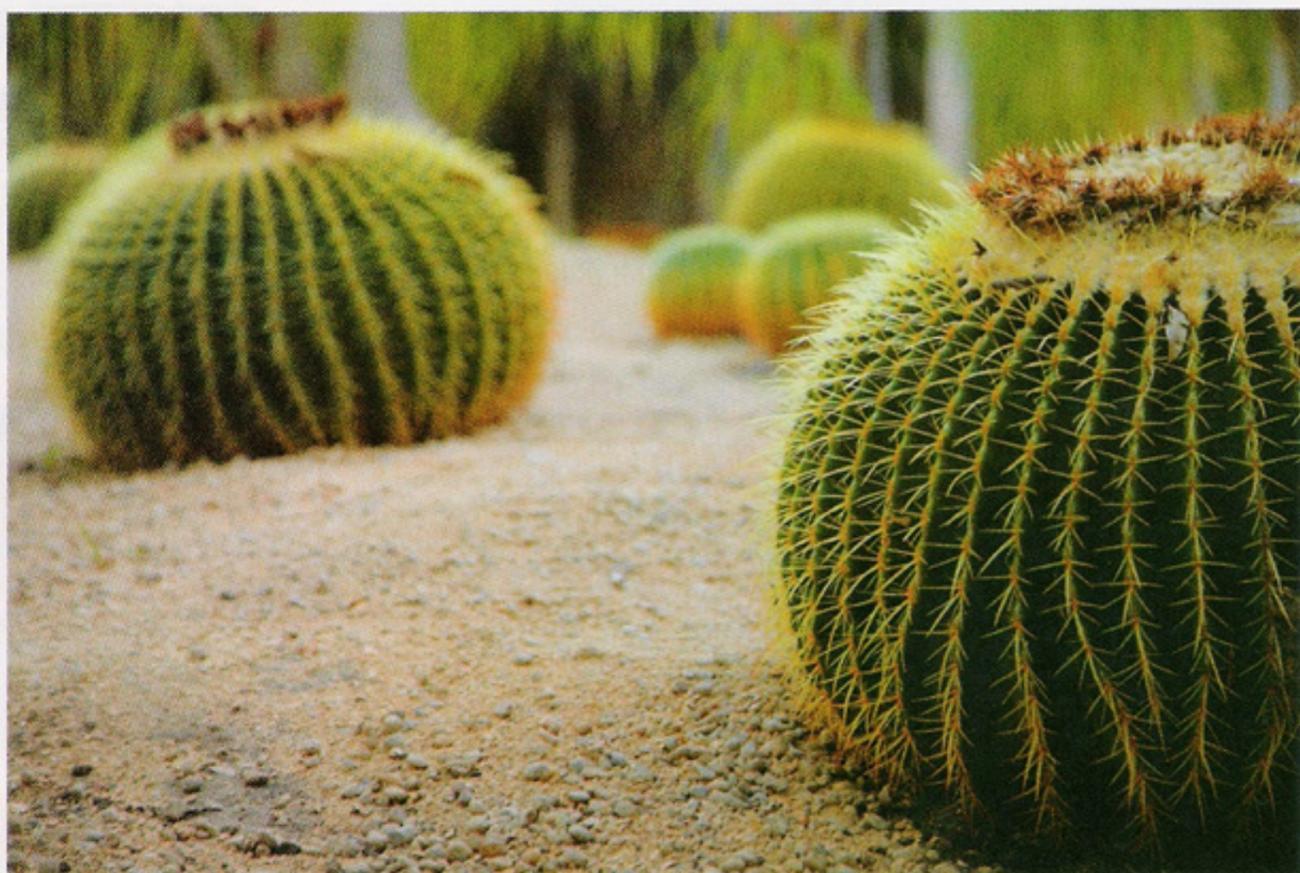


A cut above

Making a point was very much on the mind of the designer of this modern cactus garden

Story: Kelvin Carlson
Photos: Peter Brennan



“If it doesn't rain at all for six months, maybe give it a drink.” That's the advice given to me from the specialist grower of the industrial-grade, nuclear holocaust-resistant, seemingly indestructible Golden Barrel (*Echinocactus grusonii*) cacti that are thriving in this Sydney garden.

In its natural habitat, *Echinocactus* can be found eking out a meagre existence in central Mexico; however, it is now critically endangered — possibly due, in part, to an illegal trade in these handsome plants. Cattle rustling was once a part of the colourful past of Mexico, now replaced with cactus rustling, complete with bad guys, money and guns, such is the value of these extremely slow-growing cacti.

And so drought-hardy are these plants that



the grower has a Golden Barrel lying under his hot house bench that's been there for three and a half years. No water. Nothing. Zilch. Not a drop. Dead? Nah. Just sitting there, waiting patiently for a drink one day.

The original concept for this garden was not derived from a water-saving perspective — that just ended up being a bonus. It was conceived to blend harmoniously with the built environment. The dwelling, which could best be described as a Hollywood-style mansion, architecturally tipping its hat at Frank Lloyd Wright, is all rectangles, flat roof and very minimal — and it just screamed out for a minimalist, natural, Mexican desert-style garden to complement it.

The multi-stemmed Pony Tail palms (*Beaucarnea recurvata*) are absolute beauties

and were fairly difficult to source, being around 30 years old. Also drought resistant, these plants store water in their bulb-like base.

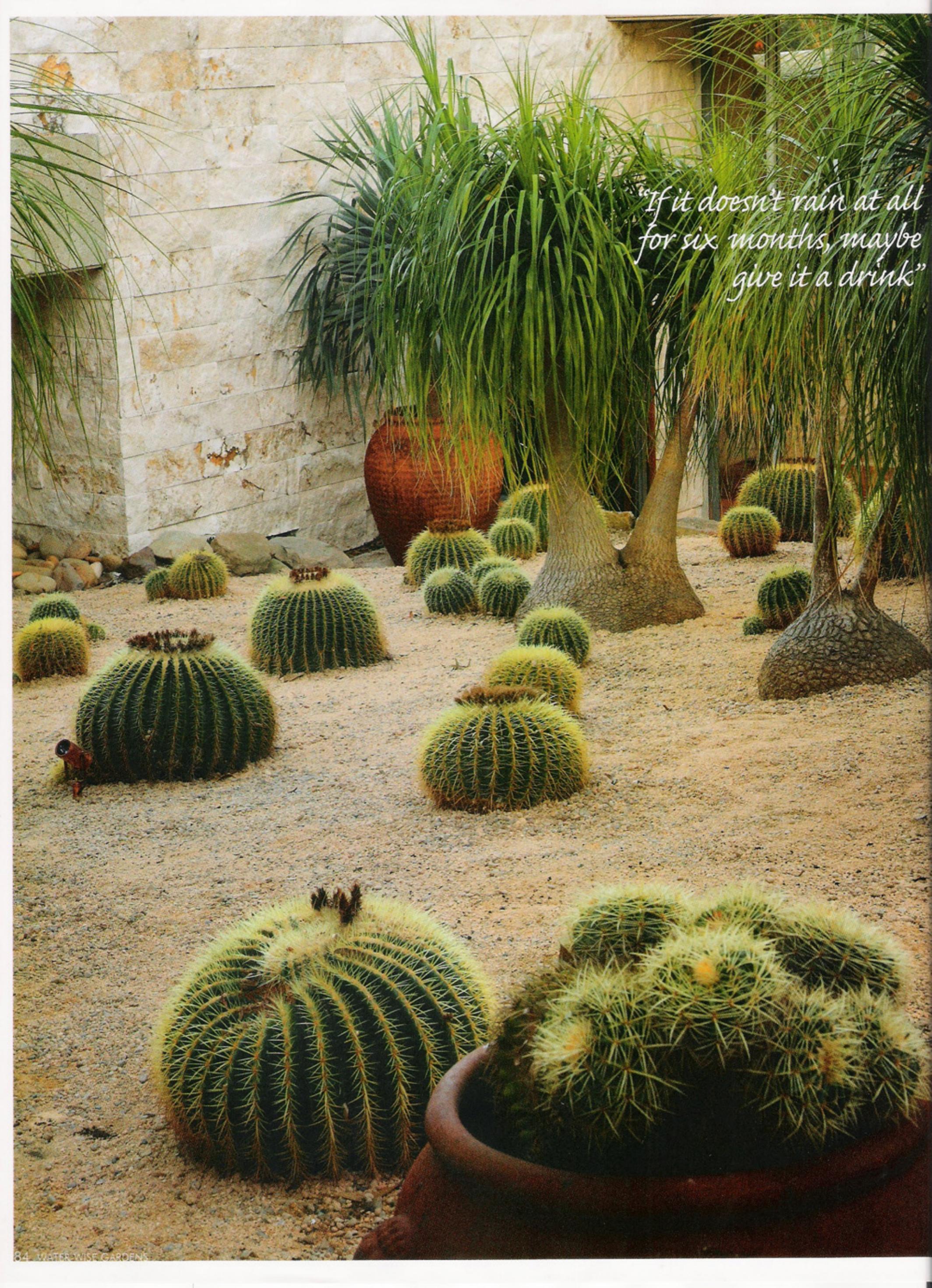
The Pony Tail palms have been used to create height and scale, placed carefully to look like they just occurred there naturally but also with a mind to achieving a pleasing perspective from all three viewing points of the garden. The tall blue *Cereus* has been used as a feature, the blue working well with the yellow of those lethal spikes on the Golden Barrels.

The *Euphorbia virosa* is actually a hybrid, being cultivated from a plant that had a bit of a problem with photosynthesis. It is an attractive cream and grey colour and was used to create a ragged "line" that defines the garden perimeter and provides a somewhat stark contrast against the white wall behind.

The Golden Barrels have been placed randomly, again creating a natural, uncontrived effect. Some have had "pups" (baby plants), placed carefully at the base to give the impression they have been there a long time and are multiplying.

The Golden Barrel (also known amusingly by the very un-PC name Mother-in-Law's Cushion), while looking a nightmare to plant, was actually relatively easy. Foam blocks were used to manhandle the plants into position, the idea being the spikes stick into the foam and not soft skin. And I learned the hard way not to squat down backwards while making this garden. In fact, I now ask myself: "What was I thinking? Just about everything involves really sharp spikes!"

The Blue Cactus (*Cereus azureus*) proved →

A photograph of a desert garden. In the foreground, several large, round, spiny cacti are scattered across a sandy and gravelly ground. One large cactus is in a terracotta pot in the bottom right. In the background, there are several tall palm trees with long, thin fronds, some in large, reddish-brown pots. A stone wall with horizontal layers is visible on the left. The overall scene is a well-maintained desert landscape.

*"If it doesn't rain at all
for six months, maybe
give it a drink"*

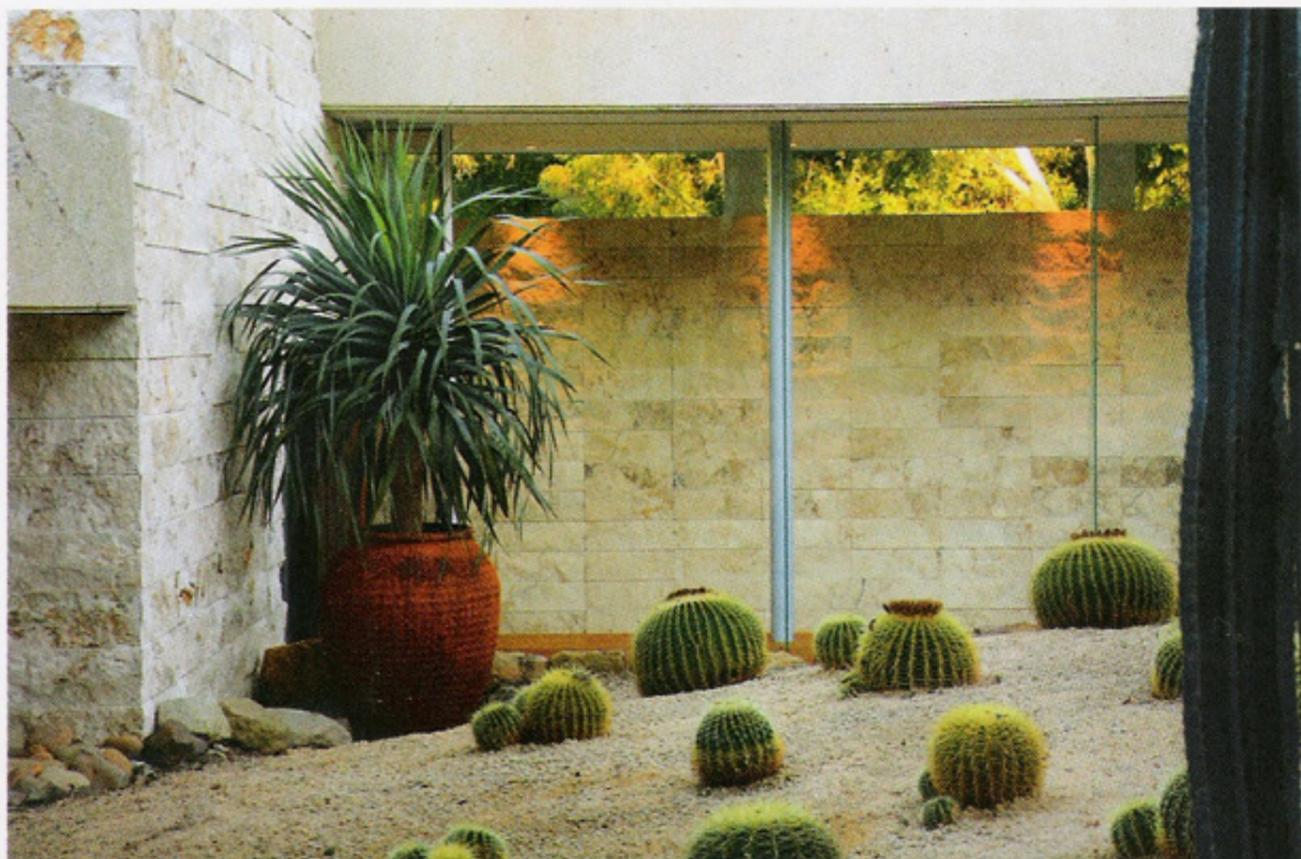
challenging but only when it came time to prise it from its home, which was really close to lots of big spiky things in a cactus garden in the Blue Mountains. This stunning plant is fairly rare. Mostly, *Cereus* are green, not the steely blue of this feature plant.

The Euphorbias were a real challenge to install. The plants we used are actually large cuttings and, having incredibly fragile branches, had to be very carefully wrapped in bubble wrap for transportation. They are also covered in lots of spines, just in case planting them wasn't challenging enough to begin with.

The Pony Tail Palms were relatively easy to plant. First they were hand dug from field-grown stock and the roots trimmed, then loaded by tractor onto a ute where they were placed in old tyres for transportation. No spikes, but the leaves have a sharp edge and cut the skin easily.

Often these sorts of gardens have fine white pebbles as a mulch as the white helps with light reflection onto the plants. However, we decided to go with a mulch consisting of 50 per cent Deco Gold (decomposed granite) and 50 per cent 10mm Nepean River Pebble. The sandy colour of the Deco Gold just looked really nice, so we added the pebble to create aeration to enable water and air to enter the soil profile.

As the mulch is laid at a depth of 75mm, weeds should be suppressed.



I deliberately chose rust-coloured pots and a very tasty-looking, shapely, rust-coloured urn as a feature. This colour seemed to fit with the earthy desert look and also contrasts nicely with the sandy-coloured decomposed granite.

Of course, no man is an island, so for technical information and assistance in planting out the garden I turned to Noel Butler from Advanced Arid Exotics. His encyclopaedic

knowledge of desert plants is astounding.

So, for those wishing to create a water-wise cactus garden, my advice is to do it. Just make sure you're not around when it's time to plant the spiky stuff! ■

Kelvin Carlson is a horticulturist and principal of Sydney-based landscape design and maintenance company, Harmony in Landscape.

